

THE ROLE OF THE HUMANITIES IN WESTERN INDUSTRIALISED SOCIETIES

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Zusammenfassung: Der am 14. Mai 2002 in der Royal Society (London) auf dem Kolloquium der Balzan-Stiftung (Mailand, Zürich) “The two cultures” vorgetragene Text geht aus von der historisch beispiellosen Vermehrung des Wissens im Bereich der Naturwissenschaften (sciences). Die Kulturwissenschaften (humanities) sind unter Legitimationsdruck, und soweit sie an alte Sprachen gebunden sind, wird ihre Lage immer schwieriger. Es gibt aber rationale Begründungen, sie zu fördern. Sciences und Humanities sind engstens miteinander verbunden; auch Naturwissenschaften sind kulturabhängig. Wissenschaftstheoretisch ist die Trennung in “zwei Kulturen” (Snow) sinnlos. Investitionen in die Kulturwissenschaften sind dringend notwendig, etwa zur Vermeidung von kulturellen Konflikten, von Fehlschlägen in der Entwicklungshilfe, von Zurückbildungen kultureller Fertigkeiten, die auch die Basis der Naturwissenschaften bilden.

We cannot fail to observe just how rapidly the academic world is changing. The better daily newspapers report daily on further expansion of knowledge. Thousands of specialist journals are available for us to read – with “Nature” and “Science” at the top of the list. The competitiveness of nations and systems is gauged in terms of the number of scientific papers published. Of course, nobody can – and nobody has to – read all these publications. Gigantic search engines are now available that enable us to access information at short notice. All around the globe we can browse through this rapidly expanding body of knowledge.

A lay person has difficulty in keeping up with the rapid succession of sensational reports. A generation ago, it was particle physics and the conquering of space. Today, it is the revolution in information technology and the onward march of the bio-sciences that offer the most spectacular examples of progress in the present generation. Where the emphasis will be tomorrow, nobody knows, but we can be sure of one thing: the speed of expansion of knowledge will not slow down – indeed it is more likely to accelerate.

If we imagine today’s knowledge in the form of a sphere, then every expansion of knowledge results in an increase in the surface area of the sphere. In other

words, with every new discovery, the size of the unknown territory is reduced, but at the same time the area on which new questions arise is increased. Knowledge and ignorance increase in their potential. It is a never-ending process. The race will not be “won” at any stage. It will continue – or perhaps be interrupted one day by a catastrophe, rather like what happened to the dinosaurs.

In other words: we have no choice but to increase our knowledge. And every increase in knowledge gives rise to side effects and dangers. What theologians used to refer to as the “devil’s cloven hoof”, which becomes visible at some stage, is today called the “dialectics of enlightenment”. It accompanies us during our scientific victory parade. Progress is a coin with a bright side and a dark reverse side. The latter means contamination of our soil, pollution of our air, anthropogenic warming of the atmosphere, increasing impoverishment of our oceans, and a growing scarcity of natural resources – especially water and energy.

But we cannot stand by passively – and the majority of people do not wish to do so. Certain individuals may withdraw as hermits and live simple lives focused on meditation and prayer. But humanity as a whole cannot do this. It would be sheer cynicism to tell the majority of human beings, plagued as they are by hunger, poverty and disease, that they should choose a way of life that rejects material comforts. We want to increase our knowledge – and we have to do so, amongst other things in order to be able to cope with the darker side of our successes.

II.

The role of the “humanities” in this context is not an easy one. The German language uses the word “Geisteswissenschaften”, which has a slightly different meaning from the English word “humanities”. The German word “Geist” (meaning “mind”, “spirit” or even “ghost”!) has associations with German idealists like Hölderlin and Hegel, Ranke and Dilthey, whereas the word “humanities” contains the idea of academic disciplines focused on people, on humanity. In other words, if one takes a broad enough interpretation, they include the social sciences and law.

These disciplines are text-bound. They create and interpret texts and images, drawing up interpretations of the social and cultural world, creating – especially in the case of jurisprudence – structures of order. They involve “remembrance – orientation – regulation”.

In the first group of disciplines, works of art and signs are interpreted and agreement reached on the “significance” of objects. These disciplines help us to understand better the world of the past. I have called this category “remembrance” in order to stress the value of this work. It provides us with a historical perspective on the genre “Man”.

A second group of humanities is concerned with “orientation”. An expansion of knowledge in these fields enables us to be better “oriented”, because we have more information about “the puzzle that is Man”. These subjects involve the

cognitive processes that take place during biological growth, learning and forgetting, the development of the personality, human social networks, birth and death. And as Man is known to be a social animal, the humanities also include those disciplines that offer empirical information about political systems (sociology, political science). By increasing and refining this knowledge, we can provide an empirical basis for decision-making processes. In this, pragmatic sense I am calling them disciplines that provide “orientation”. Anyone, for example, who wishes to reform a health system has to have solid information about the behaviour of patients, doctors, chemists and hospitals. He has to know about the pharmaceutical industry or manufacturers of medical technology. A knowledge of accounting, data-processing and perhaps even a basic grounding in criminology are also helpful.

Finally, the third group contains specialists in deontic – normative – statements. They devote their time to creating, commenting and implementing normative statements. They say what people should do and what they may or may not do. They can be philosophers or theologians, but, above all, they are lawyers. Their work is aimed less at establishing the “truth” as at balancing interests, maintaining peace, freedom from violence and respect for the rights of the individual. In this field there are not normally any earth-shattering discoveries of new information – they rather involve linguistic-intellectual arrangements, conceptual proposals on how to “order” the world, draft regulations that they hope will be accepted by the policymakers. To this extent, the term “regulation” is the right one to describe this group.

In the past, the contrast between *hard sciences* and *humanities* was often exaggerated and postulated as a fundamental clash. This is theoretically highly dubious, but is the product of the competition for human and other resources.

It is a highly dubious conflict because hard sciences and humanities are equally dependent on language and its interpretation for recording and communicating their results. Scientists also operate with images and metaphors (for example Einstein’s concept of “bent space”), using language to explain how things “work”. Their physical objects are not natural objectivisations but rather intellectual constructs that are intuitively linked with sensual impressions. Their language is time-bound, and they are dependent on the particular stage that their generation has reached in the discussion of natural philosophy and the theory of perception. In the same way, the “objects” examined by the humanities are both linguistic conventions and intellectual constructs based on a particular interpretation of the world – constructs that will also disappear when their time is up.

Of course there are differences between the use of hypotheses and experiments by the one side and the understanding and application of texts by the other. But in terms of cognition, the translation into language and the explanation of phenomena via language, there are no real differences. One should not, therefore, overdo C. P. Snow’s famous dichotomy of “two cultures” and concentrate rather on their common “core”.

What does this consist of? It seems to me to lie above all in mentalities, in the approach taken to research. At present the humanities feel under pressure. They

feel they have to defend themselves against a powerful lobby of hard scientists, national and commercial interests. The hard sciences in their modern form require large-scale technologies that take up much space and call for large sums of money from the state and from industry. They are well-versed in self-presentation, skilled at attracting funding and are able to make specific promises: conquering disease, prolonging life, fulfilling the wish for healthy children, freeing humanity from starvation etc.

These are all things that the humanities cannot do. Their protagonists are usually strongly individualistic and feel a certain distrust of money and large-scale constructs (or are even proud of despising them!). To write their books and articles they generally only require good libraries and peace and quiet for study – with the occasional subsidy for attendance at a conference or production of a publication. This is particularly the case amongst mathematicians and literary specialists. If one adds opera, concerts and promotion of the arts, then things become somewhat more expensive – but still cheap compared with the hard sciences.

Nowadays the humanities feel under pressure from several sides at once. National school systems are increasingly dropping Greek and Latin from their curricula – thus jettisoning the basis of philosophy, theology, history, history of art, history of law etc. The universities, which have their own funding problems, prefer the “useful” subjects – i.e. they prefer to fund a chair in Computer Science than one in Classical Oriental Studies, they opt for bio-physics rather than Sanskrit, international banking law rather than research into crime and punishment in the Middle Ages. Is the study of English Baroque poetry, they ask, really “useful”? Do we still need studies of Dr. Johnson or Gibbon? Is a performance of a forgotten opera by Handel really important?

Faced with general indifference towards such issues the proponents of the humanities ask themselves: Does society actually still want us? Is it – in addition to a flourishing economy, food and drink, care of the elderly, TV, vacations and general health – in fact interested in intellectually “challenging” novels, poems and plays? Does it really want the treasures of the past? Or, to put it differently: Does it want good teachers of history, literature and art, good political scientists, psychologists, sociologists and lawyers? Does it want drama specialists, archaeologists, sinologists, Japanese experts, orientalists and cultural anthropologists? And if yes – then why?

All these professions cannot prove their value to society as easily as people who bring in tangible profits, create visible value, build bridges or tunnels, find oil or predict earthquakes. So why should we promote the humanities in addition to the pursuit of scientific knowledge?

III.

I could make my job easy and give a moving speech about the value of culture – without which life does not seem worth living. I would need to start by conjuring up a picture of a boring, mechanistic world in which nobody remembers the works

of Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe, in which all pictures by Giotto to Picasso, all remembrance of history from Thucydides and Livius to modern times have disappeared. A world of scurrying ants all busily working in order to eat and eating in order to work. It would be against such a background that one could sing the praises of culture!

But it would not be a realistic picture. Experience tells us that human culture changes course in every generation and under every new circumstance. The genetic material for genius seems to be inexhaustible. Artists sing, model and write like the birds start to sing in spring, more as a response to their hormone levels than as the result of artistic inspiration. Fatalists go even further and say that the extinction of certain biological species – or, by way of analogy, the disappearance of certain cultural activities – means nothing from the point of view of evolution. Studies of Stone Age settlement patterns, the novel in ancient China, the religion of the Egyptians or the Mayas, expertise in ancient Roman law, the church system in Syria – or whatever – may decline and disappear. But, as in nature, the cultural history of Mankind will produce new mutations, new scholars who will be interested in other subjects. In the last event the *humanities* will look different, but the accrued balance will remain the same. The conclusion they therefore reach is that in the evolutionary process there is no need to *do* anything – merely observe.

However, most of us do not share such a passive, fatalistic attitude to world history. Most of us assume that change in the world is determined largely by our individual or collective behaviour. If this is the case, then it is, indeed, worthwhile considering how one wants to direct one's actions. So we should try, without the help of pathos or metaphysical assumptions, to clarify why it makes sense to nurture the humanities.

Any society that decides to concentrate exclusively on promoting the *natural sciences* will quickly find that it requires criteria for the evaluation of the results of this research. What technology should be given preference? Why should particular sectors be excluded from funding? What impact does one wish to have on Mankind and what effects does one wish to avoid? All these are decisions involving value-judgements. If one looks at the huge number of administrative decisions, from the top levels of policymaking right down to grass-roots implementation, then one sees that in the *hard sciences* a vast mass of social and political assumptions form the basis for normative standards. If these standards are not to remain in the inaccessible world of politics, then they have to be empirically researched and publicly debated. If this does not happen, one can expect financially quantifiable damage to occur.

An example of this is the massive, misguided investment that has occurred in the Third World in the name of "development aid". In almost every one of the poorer countries of the world money has gone missing because those responsible had not properly informed themselves about the language, culture, religion, customs, mentality and family structures, about local views on honour, gifts, politeness etc. The result was that aid conceived according a western rational,

economical and mechanistic approach was wasted. There was simply a lack of mutual understanding. If development aid were generally based much more closely on linguistic knowledge, cultural anthropology and religious studies, then it could be applied much more carefully.

Western societies live – to their advantage – under the rule of law. This means that they translate many of the normative standards of which I have spoken into law. What these societies want is *government of law and not of men*. They therefore need experts to utilise and monitor the resulting legal networks – in other words they need legal specialists. These networks entail costs (judges, lawyers, court personnel, prisons), but they also save huge amounts of money because they make social relationships predictable. Legal structures that are accepted avoid frictional loss from the very outset; many a potential incidence of conflict or damage does not occur because the “law” exists.

It therefore makes sense to say that *political science, sociology and jurisprudence* can provide useful knowledge and structures for any complex industrial society governed by the rule of law, and can contribute towards ensuring that life runs in a “civilised” fashion with a minimum of strife, violence or other conflicts that cost both nerves and money.

But why should we store historical knowledge? Let me illustrate this with a picture from modern life: we already store huge amounts of “old” knowledge in our computers, which are linked to the Internet. We find out about previous results from other researchers, thereby saving time and energy; we do not re-invent the wheel on a daily basis. Every time we do this we are accessing the stored knowledge and expertise of earlier generations. Without continually using what has been thought, researched and invented by others before us we would be completely helpless – not just in the technological but also in the social field. Without a historical dimension we would immediately revert to the Stone Age.

Of course, scholarly studies of the past cannot help us to make the right decision for the future. In a strict, theoretical, scientific sense one cannot learn anything from history. But just as individuals “learn” pragmatically, so, too, human groups can draw conclusions from the past and try to apply these to the future. For example the Federal Republic of Germany “learnt something” in this way from the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the catastrophe of National Socialism. Historical knowledge is not a panacea (and it would be naïve to think it was), but it can provide a basis for political decisions that it would be dangerous to do without.

Let me finally say a few words about the artistic aspect of the *humanities*. Man is not just an engineer – a *homo faber*, in the sense used by Max Frisch in his novel. Probably ever since he first walked upright, Man has painted walls, carved bones, shaped pots that were not just useful but also beautiful, told stories and sung songs. He has felt the need to interpret the world, to invent ghosts and gods, sacrifices and rituals. He has lived spiritually with his forefathers, talking to them, turning to them for comfort and assistance. Anyone who studies all this and passes it on to the next generation is giving them something immensely valuable. It is a

many-faceted, composite picture of Man, who turns out to be weak, vulnerable and full of anxieties – a being who is feeling his way uncertainly into the future. At the same time, this Man turns out to be a miracle of creativity. Is it not a miracle that we still have poetic creations like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad and Homer's Odyssey, Greek drama and philosophy (thanks to the patient work of the philologists), that we still understand Roman law (thanks to centuries of work by legal specialists), that we can admire works of art from all centuries in the showcases of the Victoria and Albert Museum or the British Museum? Our admiration for all these things cannot be directly translated into practical use and, to some extent, language is incapable of describing them. Where language stops the scope for rational justification ends too. That is why we should accept as a fact the cultural side of Man. *Homo faber* and *homo ludens* are two indivisible sides of the same human creative urge. So, in addition to pursuing scientific knowledge with its practical usefulness in mind, we have to succeed also in deciphering this complementary aspect of Mankind. We should support the humanities in our own interests, and encourage them to continue their painstaking work.

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